

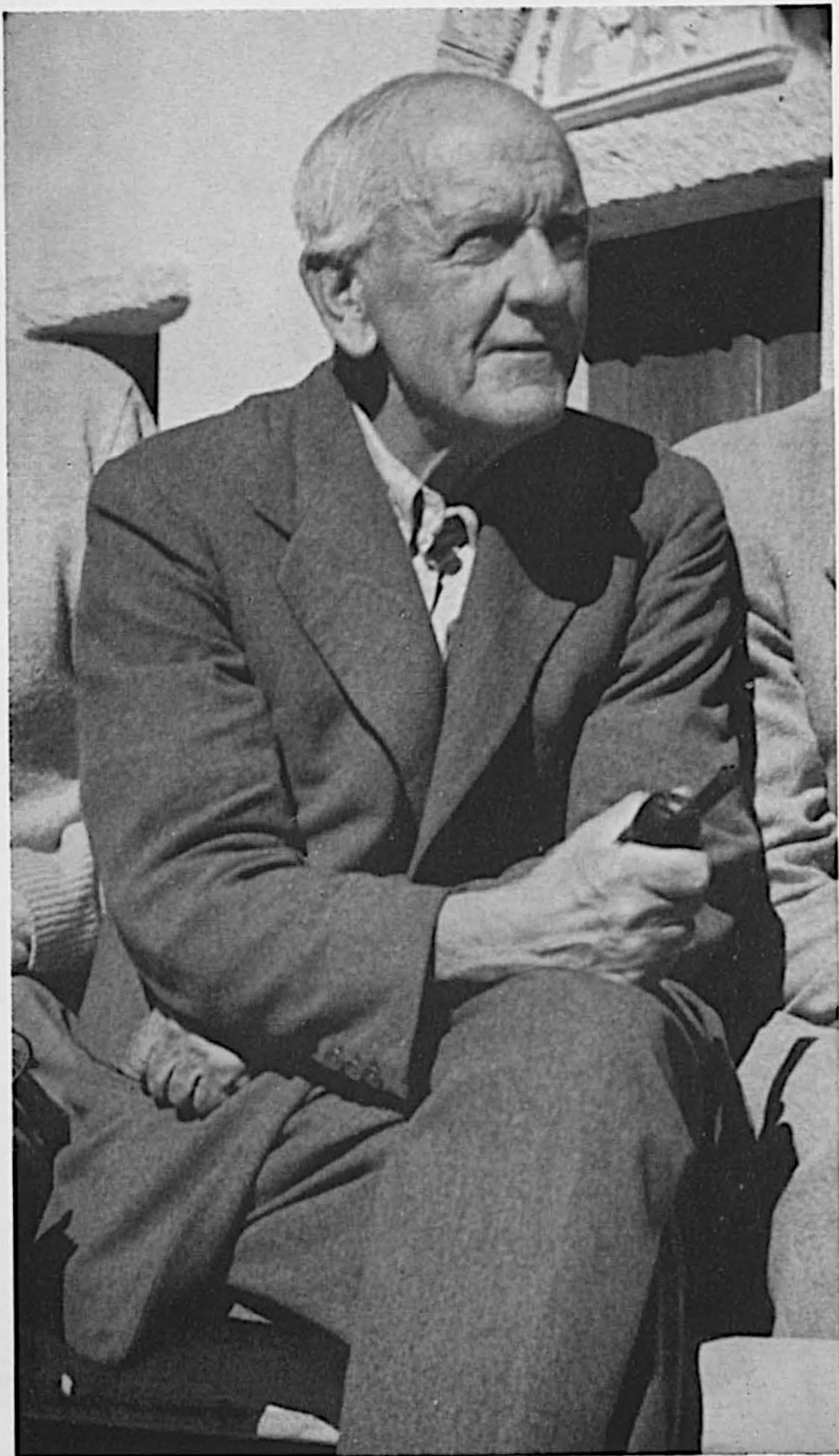
## T. GRAHAM BROWN

*A footnote to Alpine history*

BY LORD TANGLEY

THERE can be no doubt that both in achievement and character Graham Brown was one of the most outstanding (perhaps the most outstanding) amongst British climbers in the Alps during the inter-war period. Indeed, in my humble opinion his imagination and determination concerning, and his concentration on, the Brenva face of Mont Blanc has been equalled only by Whymper's similar concentration on the Matterhorn. The result was that this glorious face became an arena in which the Alpine Club's approach to mountaineering was displayed in all its purity and without international competition, although, with the last and greatest ascent, the Pear Buttress, this unhappy element was only narrowly and almost fortuitously avoided. The Brenva face became Graham Brown's own, and the history of its exploration flows directly from G.B.'s own personality. His was one of the most complex personalities I have ever known. There was the rigorous scientist whose work in physiology earned him a Fellowship of the Royal Society. There was a deep humility in the presence of the great mountains, amounting to awe. There was a deep capacity for friendship. There was a soaring ambition which quite naturally made him wish that the world should know that the great Brenva climbs were his. There was also a touchiness which made him at times a difficult companion and resulted in interruptions of friendship. I remember one fine morning, high up on Mont Blanc, I ventured to comment on the beauty of the sunrise. Receiving no answer and seeing G.B. with head bent over his ice-axe, I asked him if he was all right. The reply (without looking up) was, 'Yes, perfectly, except that I object to your conversation.' Fortunately, I then knew him well enough to realise that I had interrupted one of his deep meditations which were the mainspring of his actions.

His physical characteristics were no less remarkable. He was very short in stature and had particularly short legs. In 1926 he was already in early middle-age, but weighed little over nine stone. He had had some experience of rock-climbing but little of snow or ice work. In 1926, helped by his minute weight, he was able to scramble up rocks quite well. On snow and ice he was really quite poor, and in addition was handicapped by his very short legs. His great strength was his ability to go on indefinitely without any apparent fatigue. I recall two descents of the Nantillons glacier in one week in 1927 and the painful



*Photo: B. R. Goodfellow]*

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slowness of his descent of the dangerous passage. Neither in 1926 nor in 1927 was Graham Brown in my opinion fitted to lead a serious expedition. I mention these limitations, not for the purpose of detracting from Graham Brown's achievements, but on the contrary to emphasise the fact that his will and imagination were capable of transcending his own limitations and those of others.

I never met or heard of Graham Brown before 1926. I had climbed for some seasons with guides from the Valais and in particular with Alfons Supersaxo of Saas-Fee. In addition, we had started our Easter parties at Wasdale Head where for many years we used to take Row Head for the Easter holiday. R. J. Brocklehurst used to come to these parties, but the doyen was A. E. Barker, a schoolmaster from Birmingham who was much older than the rest of us. He had a long record of climbs in the Alps and in the Lake District and was married to the daughter of a former Vicar of Wasdale. He was very kind to us young men and in all his wanderings in the Alps he had never been up Mont Blanc. He felt that at his age it was 'now or never', and when Brocklehurst and I arranged that we should climb together in 1926 we also arranged that towards the end of our trip we and Barker should foregather somewhere at the foot of Mont Blanc.

Alfons Supersaxo having died, my wish was to engage Christian Jossi of Grindelwald who, though elderly, was still in fine form, very adequate on rock and an excellent ice man. Unfortunately he could not come, being otherwise engaged, but he recommended his nephew, a young man named Peter Bernet, with whom in years to come I climbed many times in many parts of the Alps. So the party was to have been Brocklehurst and myself with Peter Bernet. Brocklehurst had to attend a medical conference in Sweden and could not join us until the middle of August. I had to go out earlier and leave at the end of August and Brocklehurst suggested that he might bring with him another physiologist who was attending the Swedish meeting and who had done some climbing, and who earlier that season had been in the Graians and the Engadine. So the pattern of 1926 was that I should have a fortnight or so on my own with Peter Bernet and should then be joined at Grindelwald by Brocklehurst and his physiologist friend, who turned out to be Graham Brown, and that then we should collect Barker for Mont Blanc. I should then go home and Brocklehurst and Graham Brown should continue together for the rest of their holiday. This plan worked admirably. The weather was marvellous and between us we got a great deal done. During the ten days before being joined by Brocklehurst and the unknown Graham Brown, Bernet and I did the Mönch and the Eiger by ordinary routes, traversed the Lauterbrunnen Breithorn, crossed the Lötschenlücke, ascended the Gross Grünhorn and Finsteraarhorn and traversed the Jungfrau from Concordia, descending by the Guggi route.

Brocklehurst and Graham Brown duly arrived and we did the Wetterhorn together. They did the Jungfrau while I had a couple of days flesh-potting on the Lake of Thun. We then did the Schreckhorn, passed over to Fionnay, traversed the Grand Combin and Mont Velan and descended to the Great St. Bernard where we passed the night. It is at this point that Graham Brown's account of Brenva in his book begins. We were delayed in our descent to Aosta by the breakdown of the post wagon and started up for Courmayeur by the post wagon late in the evening. It is a night none of us will ever forget and is well described by Graham Brown in *Brenva*. This was the first moment that any of us had seen the south side of Mont Blanc except from distant mountains. I did not then know that, on the basis of *Running Water* and the map in Baedeker, Graham Brown had already been captivated in imagination by the Brenva face. But his excitement was more than could be accounted for, even by the magnificence of what we saw before us. At Courmayeur we duly met Barker and proceeded to the Dôme hut. On the way we passed Purtud. The halt at Plan Ponquet is well described in Chapter One of *Brenva*. Many times have we talked about this moment and many times have we examined the photographs taken from that point on that day. I have no doubt that what Graham Brown writes there is absolutely accurate, that the picture in Graham Brown's mind built up from the Baedeker map was destroyed and at the same moment the conception of Route Major was born. I am equally certain that it was an absolutely original conception on the part of Graham Brown and this I believe is an excellent illustration of the combination of his vivid imagination and his scientific mind. To abandon an imagined topography and instantly to substitute a new and, as it turned out, true one was a remarkable feat.

We went on to the Dôme hut on a superb, cloudless day. Going on by full moonlight, we completed the traverse to the Grands Mulets without ever lighting a lantern or cutting a step. I had to depart for London the same evening, but Brocklehurst and G.B. went on over the passes and ascended the Tour Noir. Before we parted, both Graham Brown and I had decided that we would like to climb together again next year. We also knew that we would like to have Bernet and his uncle Jossi as guides. After we left Purtud on the way up to the Dôme hut, there was little time left for discussion, though there was no doubt that we had seen the Route Major.

During the winter, Graham Brown read all the alpine literature there was on the subject and in particular was struck by the photograph of the Brenva face from the Col du Géant taken by Finch. This crystallised the route in his mind and when we met at Simpson's in the Strand to make plans, as he records in his book, he was anxious that we should attempt this route. I had a vague idea that the entire Brenva face was

extremely dangerous from stone-fall and falls of ice from the upper séracs. From a study of what photographs existed, Graham Brown was quite sure that under the right conditions there could be no stone-fall, and that Route Major would be entirely safe from falling ice provided the foot could be reached early enough in the morning. In retrospect, this seems to me to be quite a remarkable exercise of what I might call the scientific imagination. All subsequent experience has confirmed what Graham Brown that night said would be the fundamental physical conditions of the Brenva face. His practical proposition was that we should do what he called the 'southern zig-zag' of Mont Blanc. This was to ascend by the Brouillard arête, do a descent of the Peuterey and an ascent of his proposed new Brenva climb. All this was to be undertaken after a suitable training course.

I was to engage Jossi and Bernet, which I duly did, and the party foregathered at Lac de Champex. We were dogged by deplorable weather. We first made the traverse of the Grand and Petit Darrei and hoped to traverse the Aiguille d'Argentière, but a deterioration in the weather made us choose the Col du Chardonnet instead. We then went up to the Montenvers which we made our base. We first did the L'M and the Petits Charmoz. Next we did the Requin, in the course of which we suffered from the accident to another party described by Graham Brown in *Brenva*. What he did not mention was the splendid skill, courage and determination he displayed during the recovery of the body and the rescue of the survivor, who, though uninjured, was in a state of serious shock and hysteria. The news of the death of friends in the Lake District and the Dauphiné coming on top of this experience on our arrival back at Montenvers certainly had the unnerving effect which G.B. describes. The alternative was either to abandon the mountains or to regain our nerve. We chose the latter course, and during the next few days made ascents of the Grands Charmoz and the Aiguille de Blaitière. It is the descents from these two peaks over the Nantillons glacier to which I have referred above.

The weather had broken and now got worse. We had to turn back from the Moine ridge of the Verte and to abandon any idea of the Grandes Jorasses. Instead, we went up to the Torino hut and down to Mont Fréty, having, from the Torino hut, for the first time for either of us, seen something of the Brenva face.

In view of the bad weather, it was obvious that the South face of Mont Blanc was impossible, so we decided to make a circuit of Mont Blanc and to see it from as many angles as possible. With this object in view, we walked up to the Cantine de la Visaille in order to ascend the Aiguille de Trélatête. Graham Brown mentions this expedition but omits to explain why, in the late afternoon and early evening, we descended the Col de Trélatête at all. This was a pure error. We intended to go down

the easy Col des Glaciers, and indeed thought that that was what we were doing! But we found that we were inextricably involved in the difficulties of the famous col. In the result, we were not down on to the glacier until well after dark, and did not reach the Pavillon de Trélatête until about ten o'clock that night, having been out for twenty hours. Jossi's route-finding through the séracs in the dark was remarkable. This brings out (and I think it must be mentioned) Graham Brown's touchiness. He could not bear to admit an inadequacy or an error and suggests in his book that we set out to cross the Col de Trélatête.

Having now seen this end of Mont Blanc, our intent was to get back to the Torino hut as fast as possible. For this purpose we went down to St. Gervais in sunshine—with swallow-tailed butterflies sunning themselves on the stones—and from there ascended the Tête Rousse, intending to cross Mont Blanc and descend via Mont Maudit to the Torino. All being well, we would then attempt the new Brenva route. Unfortunately the weather broke again and we went round by train to the Montenvers, where the weather continued bad and my own time and that of the guides was up. I felt extremely sorry for Graham Brown that his dream should not have come true, and when Smythe came back to the Montenvers from his ascent with Ogier Ward of the old Brenva route, it was with a good deal of pleasure that I introduced him to Graham Brown. I had known Smythe well for some years although I never climbed with him, believing (quite rightly) that I was nowhere near his class. Seeing him and Graham Brown left at the Montenvers, each at a loose end, I believed that Smythe was competent to lead the new climb and Graham Brown to follow him. Graham Brown's heart was set on Route Major but he knew nothing, any more than I did, about the state of the ground between the Torino and the foot of the climb. Smythe had recent knowledge of the section between the Torino and the start of the old Brenva, but so far as I could judge, had never looked at or interested himself in anything beyond. In the end, as we all know, they did neither Route Major nor the variation of the Brenva route which Smythe had in mind, but an intervening climb, which they called the Sentinelle route. This was a fine climb in itself. In the book it is suggested that they saw this route from the Torino hut and settled there to attempt it.

Although Smythe and Graham Brown fell out and indeed quarrelled violently, I was fortunate to be able to remain on terms of close friendship with both. Each of them published separate accounts of the Sentinelle climb, but each talked with me intimately about it, as happened in the subsequent year with regard to the Route Major. I am forced to the conclusion that the decision to attempt the Sentinelle route was not nearly as clear-cut as *Brenva* suggests. Graham Brown in his heart of hearts wanted to go for Route Major. Smythe was really after a

variation of the old Brenva. The Sentinelle was somewhat of a compromise between the two and neither had done what he set out to do. Of these two disappointments, G.B.'s was by far the greater. He and Smythe turned upward prematurely before even trying to get to the base of the Route Major. Nevertheless, the Sentinelle is a fine route and Smythe undoubtedly regarded it as his. He also believed that it was only owing to his superior skill as a leader that Graham Brown was got up the climb! Here were evident seeds of a dispute between two highly strung men, and Graham Brown raised strong objection to some of Smythe's published accounts of the climb. Certainly by the time the climb was over Smythe had made up his mind not to climb alone with Graham Brown again.

In 1926 and 1927 I had already entered on a period of severe personal and business strain accompanied by gross overwork and in consequence, holidays for three or four years had to be treated as recuperative. During those years I had some excellent ordinary seasons in the Alps, but it was obviously impracticable that I should seek to rejoin any Brenva efforts. Nevertheless, I think that both G.B. and Smythe felt that I was one of the few who had been in on the original conception, and both used to come to me with their plans beforehand and their accounts afterwards.

I must confess that, looking back at that time, now so long ago, I still feel a pang of disappointment that I should have so narrowly missed what I am sure would have been the first ascent of Route Major by our 1927 party.

It is to be noticed that, for the attack on Route Major in 1928, Smythe proposed a party of four. This was in fact reduced to the original pair owing to the inability of Ogier Ward to come out, and the sickness of Blakeney. I know that Smythe was very unwilling to attempt Route Major with Graham Brown alone, but partly he felt that he was committed and partly I think the appeal of the Buttress had laid its hand upon him. Probably also, Graham Brown's indomitable will-power had imposed itself upon his partner, who was the stronger climber but the weaker character. Certainly, after Route Major, the two men never climbed together again, and were scarcely on speaking terms. The crux of the climb was the cutting down into the couloir round the tongue. Either this was nothing like as difficult as Graham Brown thought it to be or Graham Brown's cutting was much slower than Smythe could easily tolerate. Knowing G.B.'s 1926 form and the highly strung dispositions of both men, the opinion I formed at the time was that both these views were correct. Again, each man published accounts at the time which diverged in some respects. The mutual disappointment between them was no doubt subconsciously aggravated by the fact that Smythe felt that the climb was virtually his by reason of his greater contribution to the climbing, whereas Graham Brown regarded the

climb as his, as the materialisation of his long dream. Thereafter, each man went his own fruitful way, and the history of each is well-known. I was particularly glad that Graham Brown's wise decision to climb with guides led to such splendid results. It was also a source of gratification that my two friends, whom I introduced at the Montenvers, should have had these two great climbs together. Unfortunately, as the years went by their attitudes hardened and their mutual feelings grew no softer. When Graham Brown was writing *Brenva*, he consulted me on innumerable points concerning 1926, 1927 and 1928, and I hoped that all would be well. However, the proofs were shown to Smythe, who reacted violently, even to the point of talking about legal proceedings. Eventually they both agreed that they would accept publication in any form I approved. This involved quite substantial revision, with the result that parts of the early chapters of *Brenva* contain considerable elements of my writing.

Now that both men are dead, it seemed to me worth while to record the foregoing as a footnote to Alpine history.

I am pleased to say that my friendship with Smythe and his family remained unbroken. That with Graham Brown suffered a sad interruption.

It was one of my duties on becoming President of the Club to communicate to G.B. the decision of the Committee that the time had come for a change in the editorship of the *Alpine Journal*. At the time, unbeknownst to me he was in hospital, recovering from the effects of an accident on Ben Nevis. This is another example of his extraordinary touchiness. He could not bear to have it known that he had been involved in an accident. He took my communication, when he ultimately received it, very badly and for some years refused to speak to me or even to acknowledge my presence. This was sad, but there was nothing I could do about it. Suddenly one day out of the blue I had a little note from him saying that we were far too old friends to quarrel, and what about having lunch together? We lunched at the Athenaeum as though nothing had happened and our friendship was thus resumed.

And so I now look back over a period of forty years to two men, both friends, who in their various ways and according to their diverse abilities and personal characteristics added lustre to British mountaineering.